



Book Review: Kavneet Singh

**Sikh Nationalism and Identity In A Global Age: Giorgio Shani
(2007)[198P] ISBN: 978-0-415-42190-4**

Giorgiandrea Dharam Singh Shani is an associate professor at the College of International Relations at Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan. Holds a doctorate in Political and International Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, UK, the same University where Hew McLeod and his cohorts have received degrees propounding their expertise on the various aspects of the Sikh people, including their history and their faith.

The three main premises used by GS have been;

1. The Keshadhar identity itself being questioned using Harjot Oberoi's thesis
2. Using the victim hood theory to perpetuate an imagined 'homeland'
3. The Diaspora Sikhs are citizens of their respective adopted countries therefore it is folly to dream of a homeland especially within the current continuing globalization context

Chapter 2.....

Whereas, at the onset of colonial rule, multiple religious identities in the Punjab were possible, there existed by the end of the nineteenth century a more homogenous, modern conception of Sikh identity, as internal religious boundaries between kes-dhari and sahajdhari Sikhs and external boundaries between Sikhs and other religious communities, in particular the Hindu community, had become progressively less fuzzy and more clearly demarcated.....

The argument that there was the process of "Singh-ization" in the early 20th century; GS assumes that the keshadhar-amritdhari Sikh in the previous 200+years was figment of someone's imagination. Little does the author care to explain the very viscous religio-ethnic cleansing by the Mughal-Muslim ruling establishment with the connivance of the crafty Hindu-Brahmin-Khatri combine at pretty much every stage starting from 1708; notwithstanding that Brahminism being inimical to the Sikh Faith from its inception. Nowhere is it explained to the reader that due to a lack of Judeo-Christian type of central authority such as the present day Vatican, and since there was none as far as the Sikhs

were concerned albeit the Sarbat Khalsa and the Gurmatas were held at irregular intervals in times of peace, which was uncommon, and furthermore Sikhs were pretty much on the defensive continuously and unable to take a breather and get their house in order. There were a fairly large number of Hindus who sported beards and tied turbans and physically passed off as Sikhs since the powers to be were Sikhs. The moment the Sikh Empire was annexed the same Hindu pretenders simply removed their turbans. The Sikhs remained as is; with the exception of the normal swings in numbers which all Faith groups go through except that with the Sikhs the barometer of religiosity is so highly visible that the slightest change in numbers make it much more pronounced. That by no means diminishes the Singh out of the Sikh. The inroads made by the British Christian missionaries and the rabid Arya-Samajists was in a vacuum when the all the major Sikh institutions were held by the government indirectly starting immediately after the annexation of the Empire of Panjab. Sikh civilians were prohibited from taking “amrit sanchar”. Sikhs in the armed forces were allowed to take “amrit sanchar” but were not allowed to wear the “kirpan” till 1914, i.e. nearly 65 years later; and that too after much agitation. Furthermore Sikhs were not allowed to greet each other with the Sikh salutation of “Wahe Guruji Ka Khalsa! Wahe Guruji Ki Fateh!” If these very important facts were articulated in its proper perspective by the author the argument that the real Singh came about only after the Singh Sabha movement becomes untenable.

Chapter 3 deals with.....

A distinct Sikh identity arose as a result of the dialectical interaction between the Sikh tradition and the colonial state which made the construction of a Sikh modernity centered on the mythology and symbolism of the Khalsa possible. Internal and external religious boundaries between Sikhs and Hindus and Kes-dhari and Sahajdhari Sikhs respectively were institutionalized first by the colonial state's project of classification and enumeration as best exemplified by the census and subsequently by the establishment of the SGPC.....

GS' conveniently forgets that the Sikh Faith is grounded in the harsh and gory history glaring at the reader at every turn which has been cleverly coined as mythology by him. The Sikh modernity was not constructed under the auspices of the Mcleods and Oberois of the world. Being on the defensive during most of their history and due to the lack of a central authority like Christianity for lack a better example; the Sikh Sabha only put on paper what was already being practiced by the Sikhs in general throughout from the previous 200+ years; therefore the “construction of the Sikh modernity” does not arise. Sehajdhari is term coined only in the 20th century for convenience by the vested interests inimical to the Sikh Faith. Because of the Hindu caretakers/priest ‘mahants’ propped up by the British had control of the Darbar Sahib and several other historical gurdwaras around Panjab the term sejehdahri was thrust upon the Sikh by the Hindu of Panjab. This term in common parlance denotes a shaven man typically a Hindu. This term again, in the real sense means slow learner but who is, keshdhari to begin with; therefore the distinctions the author speaks about become moot. The very small percentage of urban Hindus had for a short period, have their first born son adopt the Sikh Faith but that was primarily for economic reasons since the colonial powers were more inclined to give jobs to Sikhs. These families who were Hindus to start with claimed to be Sehajdharis and their efforts have waxed and waned but continue to stick their nose in Sikh Spiritual

affairs. This is a most unusual phenomenon anywhere in any Faith group. The British furthered their own overt agenda onto the Sikhs with the help of the Hindu elite. All this still does not change the basic super structure and continuous formal Sikh traditions.

Chapter 4 is somewhat truthful....

A the time of writing, most of the militants – and their backers inside the Sikh ‘political system’ – are either dead or content to articulate their demands from within the Indian political system. Although the demise of the Khalistani movement can be attributed to its physical elimination.....

GS in the conclusion of this chapter has put across part of the truth. The part which is missing is that over quarter million Sikh men, women and children were eliminated through genocide by the Indian state with diabolical dimensions. GS has glossed over the fact that resources and avenues for the common Sikh at large were and are limited to recruitment in the armed forces and maybe the local and state agencies. The vast majority of Sikhs have always subtly and overtly made to compromise their core religious values to either get gainful employment or get promoted in the private and public sector. There is an unwritten code in the Indian armed forces to dissuade anyone from partaking in “amrit sanchar” or the formal Sikh initiation ceremony, at least since 1984. The Sikhs are extremely adaptable, but eliminating anyone’s spirit is not easy and can never be repressed permanently and therefore with the Sikhs the spark of “liberty” is innate and will always be latent.

Chapter 5 has some facts which have been construed to fit the author’s argument.....

The selective memory of the nationalist discourse ‘remembers’ the violence which the (Muslim/Hindu) ‘Other’ inflicted upon the (Sikh) ‘Self’ but ‘forgets’ both the complicity of the ‘Self’ in the violence of partition and the events leading up to 1984...

Furthermore, the existence of the concept of ghallughara in the Sikh tradition and its translation as ‘holocaust’ or ‘genocide’ allows nationalists to both construct a discourse of ‘victimhood’ and legitimize the ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1991) of the nation internationally.....

Looks like GS’s thinking is on the very same lines as Brian Keith Axel’s book in reference to an imagined homeland syndrome. I think it is easy and blatantly wrong to misconstrue the fact that the collective memory of the Sikhs is not selective and during the partition of that part of South Asia the Sikhs were participants albeit whether on the defensive or the offensive is highly debatable. I wonder in GS’s mind how many planned murders by a state agency of an unarmed, innocent civilian population can be termed as a genocide or a holocaust? Over a quarter million mostly male between the ages of 15-45 have been tortured, murdered sadistically and made to disappear and GS would sarcastically label that, as; Sikh nationalists using the ‘victimhood’ card to legitimize any aspirations. This patronizing attitude by Authors towards the Sikhs, are primarily by three groups. Firstly the SOAS, McLeod line of Europeans who (some) were Christian missionaries, Sikhs, Hindus and/or communists; secondly Sikh and Non-Sikh who have vested interests including getting funded directly or indirectly by India to earn their doctorates to continue their scholarships and finally Hindu and non-Sikhs who are with the ruling establishment. Furthermore some in the first and all in the second and third groups have to also toe the line of the establishment because the fear in the background is

the psychological blackmail by the establishment of either labeling them anti-national, traitors or stop funding; not allowing an honest writer to enter the country by putting him/her on a blacklist as a terrorist of sort and/or the veiled threat of doing away with loved ones back in the old country, thereby stifling any dissent.

Chapter 6.....

Putting Sikhs ‘on the map’ internationally through the establishment of a sovereign Sikh state has important domestic consequences.....In those societies, such as a contemporary France and much of continental Europe, where such recognition is not forthcoming, it is much more difficult to be both a practicing Sikh and a citizen of the state.....

GS surely is remiss in not mentioning that any political progress for a practicing Sikh in the diaspora is a tightrope walk since performing one's domestic political duties on behalf of the constituency versus the religious, civil, human rights and other daily hurdles from school to employment are major challenges. Vested interests from the South Asian sub-continent interfering in various ways to compound matters make it even more complex. In France the Sikh ‘Turban’ debacle is a major infringement on the basic human and civil rights of the individual and goes against the secular principles, that country is based on, but nonetheless French-Sikhs are in a David versus Goliath legal battle for the right to wear their religiously mandated “Turban” which is simply a part of who they are! Here is a prime example of a ‘people-collective’ having no representation and in any other situation this issue would have been resolved much more quickly and amicably if the ‘people-collective’ were a sovereign state.

In Chapter 7 the argument put across by GS is.....

As a result of globalization , faith has ‘obtained greater significance as a non-territorial touchstone of identity in today’s more global world’In the first place, globalization – through economic restructuring programmes.....Second, globalization has decreased the salience of territory in the construction of individual and collective identities....Finally, globalization has, through the ICT revolution in particular, facilitated the dissemination of these universal core beliefs and tenets on a global scale.....

Firstly just because a Diaspora ‘Sikh’ can live in any adopted country and the second generation being born there is going to be part and parcel of that land/country, just like every other ethnic group; be it British-Sikh or American-Sikh. But one has nothing to do with the other. The other being whether a homeland is necessary or not! Secondly GS is right that one's core beliefs are personal and universal. Yet on the same token if that is true then there need not be any countries required even though the glaring fact is that practically all the countries are independent of each other based primarily on religion and have a homeland or a holy land, even though some may claim on paper to be secular – which is another story. Finally, how does the advent of the internet revolution and the prevalence and easy dissemination of any kind of information across the globe minimize or negate the fact that a people or collective need not have a place of their own to protect their basic values in whatever fashion the collective may deem fit with no outside interference. This argument seems very casual and ignorant of the ground realities.

In this section, two transnational actors seeking to represent the Khalsa Panth will be examined: the World Sikh Council and UNITED SIKHS.....

GS has forgotten to mention a pertinent fact that the World Sikh Council – America Region is a transparent ‘panth’ mandated ground up national organization representing 45 religious institutions and there is none other like it anywhere else. Again GS forgets to clearly mention that United Sikhs is specifically a NGO with absolutely no ‘panthic’ mandate but doing charitable work. Both the examples in many ways really does not explain GS’s argument how such organizations can replace a homeland of any kind for a people-collective.

In India, copies of the questionnaire were distributed to selected group of thirty Sikhs in Chandigarh, New Delhi and Mumbai during field research in 1997 and short visits in November 2002 and March 2007.....

Only 30 questionnaires were used to do his statistical sampling and that too only in the cities of Chandigarh where the vast majority are government employees and retired armed forces pensioners. Further in Delhi and Mumbai where the vast majority are small self employed businessmen. One wonders why such a limited sampling and also completely ignoring the fact that 80% of the Sikh population lives in rural areas with probably a very different perspective.

If the author’s argument holds true then starting with the Jewish state of Israel, all [200+/- countries globally] these so called homelands/holy lands are not necessary because every one of these people again starting with the Jews, who live in the diaspora with all the same issues, etc., should imagine their homelands in their minds and continue to live and suffer in silence, now that the internet connects everybody. In a simplistic example maybe the author wants any and all groups without a homeland to start a ‘avatar’ or an ‘alter ego’ in ‘cyberspace’ and satisfy all their aspirations and be content in the reality that in the 21st century everyone is connected somehow through the advent of the internet therefore no real physical place/territory is required to redress the harsh inequities meted out to any collective group by the ruling elite. In conclusion the author’s arguments articulated in the book seem naïve, frivolous and immature to say the least.

Giorgio Shani
Faculty of Intl Relations
Ritsumeikan University
56-1 Kitamachi, Toji-in, Kita-ku
Kyoto, Japan 603-8577

Ph: 81/75-466-3505
Email: gshani@ir.ritsumei.ac.jp